

THE YOKE OF REPENTANCE:  
DAVID'S POST-SIN CONDUCT IN SEFER SHEMUEL AND TEHILLIM 51

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

One of the most beloved figures—arguably *the* most beloved—in Israel's history, King David continues to inspire through Tehillim and the narratives about his spectacular faith and kingship. We pray for his descendant to herald the messianic era. The painful episode of Bat Sheva and Uriah, involving grave sins pertaining to adultery and murder, is all the more wrenching coming from David. Traditional interpreters must offer a fair reading of the biblical text while maintaining proper reverence for our heroes.<sup>1</sup>

In his analysis of the passage, Abarbanel insists that David is guilty of adultery and murder. He cites the celebrated Gemara: “Whoever says that David sinned is merely erring” (*Shabbat* 56a). Though this passage attempts to mitigate the extent of David's sins by stating that Uriah had given Bat Sheva a *get*, and Uriah was guilty of death as a rebel against the throne, Abarbanel argues with this understanding. He suggests that the textual proofs

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions of this balance, see e.g., R. Amnon Bazak, *Ad ha-Yom ha-Zeh: Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching* (Hebrew), ed. Yoshi Farajun (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2013), pp. 432-470; R. Shalom Carmy, “To Get the Better of Words: An Apology for *Yir'at Shamayim* in Academic Jewish Studies,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990), pp. 7-24; R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “A Living Torah” (Hebrew), in *Hi Sihati: Al Derekh Limmud ha-Tanakh*, ed. Yehoshua Reiss (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), pp. 17-30; R. Yaakov Medan, *David u-Bat Sheva: ha-Het, ha-Onesh, ve-ha-Tikkun* (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2002), pp. 7-24; R. Joel B. Wolowelsky, “*Kibbud Av* and *Kibbud Avot*: Moral Education and Patriarchal Critiques,” *Tradition* 33:4 (Summer 1999), pp. 35-44.

adduced in David's defense are not compelling, whereas the prophet Natan explicitly accuses David of sinning with David confessing and repenting. In fact, Rav, the leading disciple of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi (known simply as "Rabbi"), dismisses his teacher's defense of David on the spot: "Rabbi, who is descended from David, seeks to defend him and expounds [the verse] in David's favor." Therefore, concludes Abarbanel, "these words of our Sages are the ways of *derash*, and I have no need to respond to them.... I prefer to say that [David] sinned greatly and confessed greatly and repented fully and accepted his punishment and in this manner he attained atonement for his sins."<sup>2</sup>

Although Abarbanel presents himself as an independent interpreter in this instance, he has ample precedent within rabbinic tradition. A number of Talmudic sources do not mitigate David's sins. For example, there are opinions that Bat Sheva was possibly a married woman or certainly a married woman<sup>3</sup>; that the initial encounter should be viewed halakhically as the rape of a married woman since Bat Sheva was not in a position to decline<sup>4</sup>; that David was culpable for the death of Uriah<sup>5</sup>; and that Yoav bears guilt for failing to defy David's immoral orders regarding Uriah.<sup>6</sup> The unambiguous

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<sup>2</sup> Commentary on Samuel (Jerusalem: Torah ve-Da'at, 1955), pp. 342–343.

<sup>3</sup> *Bava Metzia* 59a; *Sanhedrin* 107a; *Midrash Tehillim* 3:4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ketuvot* 9a.

<sup>5</sup> *Yoma* 22b; *Kiddushin* 43a.

<sup>6</sup> *Sanhedrin* 49a.

textual evidence against David seems to have convinced Abarbanel that it was unnecessary to cite additional sources beyond Rav's dismissal of his teacher's defense of David.<sup>7</sup>

The *peshat* reading of David's sins yields several significant lessons. Rabbi Yehudah he-Hasid observes that this story warns of the immense power of lust (*Sefer Hasidim* 619). Ralbag further suggests that a leader must identify with his nation's suffering; David's problems began when he remained at home instead of leading Israel to war against Ammon (*To'elet* 42, at the end of Shemuel Bet, chapter 21).<sup>8</sup> More broadly, Rabbi Amnon Bazak observes that this story exemplifies the absolute honesty and integrity of Tanakh. Prophecy shows no favoritism and judges all people—even the beloved David—by the standards of the Torah.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Abarbanel was not the first medieval interpreter to assert David's guilt, either. R. Yehudah b. Natan (Rashi's son-in-law, in *Teshuvot Hakhmei Provencia*, vol. 1 no. 71), R. Yeshayah D'Trani (on Tehillim 51:1; but see his remarks on 2 Sam. 12:4, where he adopts the view that Uriah had given Bat Sheva a *get*), and R. Yosef Ibn Caspi (on Shemuel Bet 11:6) preceded him in understanding that Bat Sheva was a married woman. Ralbag (*To'elet* 8) preceded Abarbanel by insisting that Uriah cannot be judged as a rebel against the throne and therefore his death was unjustified.

<sup>8</sup> This point may be disputed. Kings did not go into every battle, since their death would be devastating. See, especially, Shemuel Bet 21:16-17 where David's troops insisted that David was more valuable to them if he were to remain safe in Jerusalem: "It was then that David's men declared to him on oath, 'You shall not go with us into battle any more, lest you extinguish the lamp of Israel!'"

<sup>9</sup> R. Amnon Bazak, *Ad ha-Yom ha-Zeh*, p. 469. Scholars have observed that there is no known analogy to this honest, critical stance toward one's own heroes in ancient Near Eastern literature. See, for example, George Mendenhall, *Ancient Israel's Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 112.

In addition to these lessons to be derived from David's sins, Abarbanel focuses on the reader who should be inspired by David's repentance. Similarly, the Talmud views this narrative as the ultimate model for individual repentance:

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai: David was not the kind of man to do that act [Bat Sheva incident], nor was Israel the kind of people to do that act [the Golden Calf incident]...Why, then, did they act thus? [God predestined it so] in order to teach that if an individual has sinned [and hesitates about the effect of repentance] he could be referred to the individual [David], and if a community commits a sin they should be told: Go to the community [to appreciate the effect of repentance]. (*Avodah Zarah* 4b-5a)

In this essay, we will follow the lead of this Gemara and Abarbanel, and explore aspects of David's exemplary process of repentance in the narratives in the Sefer Shemuel and in Mizmor 51.

## DAVID'S ACCEPTANCE OF SIN AND RETRIBUTION

Though God rejected King Shaul and his dynasty for Shaul's sins, God allowed David and his dynasty to remain on the throne for centuries despite David's sins. Rabbi Yosef Albo (*Ikkarim* 4:26) and Abarbanel suggest that David's sins were in the realm of human frailty, so the monarchy could endure. In contrast, Shaul sinned specifically in his role as king, and therefore forfeited his throne.

Rabbi Yaakov Medan challenges their answer. David abused his royal authority by sending his servants to take a hero's wife, and then had Uriah

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killed by using the army and issuing orders to Yoav. These sins, therefore, emanated from David in his capacity as king. Rabbi Medan therefore suggests that God allowed David to remain on the throne because David immediately confessed and repented: “David said to Natan, ‘I stand guilty before the Lord!’” (Shemuel Bet 12:13). In contrast, Shaul first attempted to deflect his guilt, and only after the piercing prophecy of Shemuel did he finally admit his wrongdoing.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of whether Rabbi Medan is “correct” regarding God’s rationale of retaining David on the throne, there certainly is evidence of David’s repentance in the ensuing narratives in the Sefer Shemuel. A hallmark feature of biblical narrative is “dual-causality.” God often reveals His plans through prophecy, and then characters act on their own free will and unwittingly fulfill the divine plan. Following the Bat Sheva episode, Natan prophesies to David that he will be punished from within his household:

“...Therefore the sword shall never depart from your House—because you spurned Me by taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite and making her your wife.’ Thus said the Lord: ‘I will make a calamity rise against you from within your own house; I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun. You acted in secret, but I will make this happen in the sight of all Israel and in broad daylight.’” (Shemuel Bet 12:10-12)

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<sup>10</sup> R. Yaakov Medan, *David u-Bat Sheva*, p. 38; cf. Yehudah Elitzur, “The War Against Amalek: Saul’s War Against Amalek and Its Place in Prophetic Thought” (Hebrew), in Elitzur, *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra: Mehkarim Geografi'im Histori'im ve-Hagoti'im* (Hebrew), ed. Yoel Elitzur and Amos Frisch (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1999), pp. 113-120.

The death of David's infant son (chapter 12), Amnon's rape of Tamar and being killed by Avshalom (chapter 13), and Avshalom's rebellion, rape of David's concubines, and being killed by Yoav (chapters 15-18) are thereby cast as divine retribution for David's sins. Amnon and Avshalom sinned out of their own free will, and not out of a desire to fulfill Natan's prophecy. Unlike all the other characters in the narrative, David was aware of the divine plan of retribution, since Natan had prophesied it to him. David did not know specifically how this punishment would unfold, yet his consciousness of his sin and the divine decree decisively affected his behavior.

Jonathan Jacobs suggests that the narrative depicting David's contrition while the child was still alive, and then calming down after the son's death, is intended as a contrast with the perception of David's officers. The officers mistakenly assumed that David was acting as a normal father with a gravely ill child, and therefore expected David to be inconsolable after learning of the child's death. However, David was conscious that his son's illness was a divine decree for his sin, and therefore was crying to atone for his sins. Once the child died, David sensed atonement and was relieved, and went to the House of God before eating.<sup>11</sup>

This contrast of perceptions between David and the other characters continues into the narratives about Amnon and Avshalom. After Amnon raped Tamar, David learned of this horrific act and was outraged (Shemuel Bet 13:21). Shockingly, however, he did not punish Amnon. Moreover,

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Jacobs, "The Death of the Child of David from Bathsheba (Shemuel Bet 12:13-25)" (Hebrew), *Megadim* 50 (2009), pp. 135-142.

Avshalom began his rebellion by telling people that he would judge people fairly, unlike David (Shemuel Bet 15:3-4). Although Avshalom was a demagogue, his claim was fundamentally correct, since David did not punish Amnon for an egregious sin (Abarbanel, Yehudah Kiel<sup>12</sup>). But *why* did David refrain from punishing Amnon? Likely following the prophetic criticism of David's spoiling of Adoniyahu later on (Melakhim Aleph 1:6), the Septuagint and Josephus suggest that David exhibited favoritism toward his son Amnon. However, Yehudah Elitzur cogently maintains that unlike the other characters who acted on their own, David understood that Amnon's rape of Tamar was in part retribution for David's own sins. This knowledge paralyzed him from meting out justice when his son committed a similar crime.<sup>13</sup>

During Avshalom's rebellion, David surprised his priests Tzadok and Evyatar by ordering them to keep the Ark in Jerusalem:

“Take the Ark of God back to the city. If I find favor with the Lord, He will bring me back and let me see it and its abode. And if He should say, ‘I do not want you,’ I am ready; let Him do with me as He pleases.” (Shemuel Bet 15:25-26)

David similarly considered Shimi's curses and insults to be possible divine retribution, and therefore did not allow Avishai to harm Shimi:

But the king said, “What has this to do with you, you sons of Tzeruyah? He is abusing [me] only because the Lord told him to

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<sup>12</sup> Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Shemuel Bet* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1981), p. 447. Prior to his sin, David was praised specifically for his just reign: “David reigned over all Israel, and David executed true justice among all his people” (Shemuel Bet 8:15).

<sup>13</sup> Elitzur, “David Son of Jesse—A Model for Penitents” (Hebrew), in *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra*, pp. 144-149. Cf. Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Shemuel Bet*, p. 435.

abuse David; and who is to say, ‘Why did You do that?’” (16:10; cf. 19:24).

Most strikingly, David ordered his army not to harm Avshalom (18:5). Yoav disobeyed by killing Avshalom (18:10-15), and then sharply rebuked David for betraying his loyal followers by mourning for the enemy (19:6-8). Yehudah Elitzur again maintains that David does not appear to be acting merely out of parental favoritism. Unlike all the other characters, David understood that Avshalom’s rebellion was also divine retribution for his own sin of Bat Sheva and Uriah. The weight of his sin and his acceptance of the divine decree paralyzed him.

Throughout the narrative, then, David acknowledged that all was from God, and that he was in God’s hands. He accepted divine retribution and the weight of his sins paralyzed him in his conduct with Amnon and Avshalom.<sup>14</sup> Yehudah Elitzur argues further that David’s brokenhearted contrition is all the more meaningful, since he had such a strong personality. These features make David the ultimate role model of repentance.<sup>15</sup>

## MIZMOR 51

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<sup>14</sup> See also Ari Mermelstein, “Retribution, Repentance, Restoration: The Motives and Message Underlying Avshalom’s Rebellion,” *Nahalah* 1 (1999), pp. 51-64.

<sup>15</sup> Elitzur, “David Son of Jesse—A Model for Penitents” (Hebrew), in *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra*, p. 148.



In addition to David's contrition expressed in Sefer Shemuel, Mizmor 51 contributes additional dimensions to this discussion:

For the leader. A psalm of David, when Natan the prophet came to him after he had come to Bat Sheva. (Tehillim 51:1-2)

Mizmor 51 expresses David's feelings of remorse and repentance, as he attempted to rebuild his relationship with God after his sin. Ibn Ezra and Radak maintain that David composed this psalm after Natan left the palace following his rebuke of David in Shemuel Bet chapter 12. Alternatively, Amos Hakham suggests that David may have composed the psalm while Natan was still in the palace. Either way, the mizmor functions as an extension of David's poignant confession, "I stand guilty before the Lord" (Shemuel Bet 12:13).<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the mizmor, David pleads for forgiveness, and expresses an overwhelming sense of his sin: "Indeed I was born with iniquity; with sin my mother conceived me" (51:7). Several commentators, including Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Malbim, explain that David states how lust is part of human nature in an attempt to mitigate the sin to plead for mercy. Meiri, however, maintains that David is exaggerating his sin, proclaiming that he feels as though he has been sinning since the womb (see also Amos Hakham). It is unlikely that David is attempting to mitigate his sin. Rather, he is consumed by guilt, and pours his broken heart out to God.

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<sup>16</sup> Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Tehillim* vol. 1 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1979), p. 296.

After pleading to God to restore their relationship, David prays, “I will teach transgressors Your ways, that sinners may return to You” (51:15). In this manner, David understands that if God accepts his repentance, others who have sinned will be inspired and find their way back to God, as well.

The mizmor concludes with a national prayer:

May it please You to make Zion prosper; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Then You will want sacrifices offered in righteousness, burnt and whole offerings; then bulls will be offered on Your altar. (51:20-21)

Surprisingly, the plea for the building of Jerusalem’s walls seems to refer to the period after the destruction of the First Temple, since Jerusalem’s walls were intact from before David’s lifetime until the Babylonians breached them prior to the destruction of the Temple. Rashi suggests that after praying for personal atonement, David prayed for the Temple to be built by Shelomo. However, the psalmist prays for the building of the walls of Jerusalem, not the Temple. Moreover, people could offer sacrifices on other shrines during David’s lifetime, whereas the final two verses of this mizmor suggest that the people could not bring offerings.

Ibn Ezra quotes a Spanish rabbi who therefore explained that a later writer added these two verses after the destruction of the First Temple. This writer drew inspiration from David’s prayer for forgiveness and pleaded to God: please forgive us as a nation as You forgave David as an individual. In this reading, the text of the mizmor

itself epitomizes the idea that David serves as a model of repentance for later generations.<sup>17</sup>

It is fitting that we open every Amidah with a verse from Mizmor 51: “O Lord, open my lips, and let my mouth declare Your praise” (51:17). Although it is the supreme privilege to be invited to stand before God, we begin by expressing that we feel unworthy. This introductory verse becomes all the more poignant when we know its context in Mizmor 51, as David struggled to restore his relationship with God. David’s repentance from his sin of Bat Sheva and Uriah, both in the Shemuel narratives and in Mizmor 51, has inspired all later generations, setting the tone for contrition and rebuilding a relationship with God:

Rabbi Shemuel b. Nahmani citing Rabbi Yonatan explained: The saying of David the son of Yishai and the saying of the man raised on high (Shemuel Bet 23:1), [means, it is] the saying of David the son of Jesse who established firmly the yoke [discipline] of repentance. (*Mo’ed Katan* 16b)

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<sup>17</sup> For an overview of traditional views on the authorship of the Book of Psalms, see Hayyim Angel, “Authorship and Structure of Psalms,” in Angel, *Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi’im and Ketuvim* (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 210-219.